

Democrats, Pharmacists Criticize Bush Drug Proposal

By Amy Goldstein and Dana Milbank
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The White House yesterday said that a new pharmacy discount card for older Americans would offer elderly patients deep price cuts on medicine and enable them to shop easily for the best deal on the specific medicine they take.

But Democrats immediately criticized the new White House plan as not going far enough to defray the large drug expenses of people on Medicare, and a senior Bush adviser said the discount card "is not a substitute" for adding drug coverage to the federal health insurance program for the elderly.

The discount plan, which the administration says can be put into place by the Department of Health and Human Services by next year without congressional approval, also drew a swift, skeptical response from organizations that represent pharmacists, who predicted that older Americans could end up getting discounts at their expense.

Bush will formally unveil the discount program at a White House ceremony this morning at which he also will announce a set of eight principles that he hopes will guide Congress as lawmakers begin a new round of debate this summer over how to revamp Medicare.

Yesterday, aides offered details of how the discounts would work. Using a market-based approach, the plan would rely on companies that manage pharmaceutical benefits to negotiate reduced prices with drug manufacturers and pass on the discounts. Drug companies, the theory goes, would be willing to offer discounts of as much as 20 percent because of the prospect of a large volume of sales.

According to a senior administration official, the agency that runs Medicare will set rules for companies that want to offer discount cards, requiring them to affiliate with large numbers of pharmacies and to offer discounts in every major class of medication.

All Americans age 65 and older would be eligible to select one card at a time and would be able to switch cards frequently to allow them to select the one that offers the best prices. The companies could charge a sign-up fee of up to \$25.

Medicare will run a public information campaign about the discount program starting this fall, the aide said. Within two years, Medicare will publish information about how much each company offering discounts charges for specific medicine, allowing patients to comparison shop.

Congressional Democrats denounced the plan as inadequate. Democratic National Committee Chairman Terry McAuliffe called the idea "a placebo, not a prescription," saying that it does not provide insurance against high drug prices.

Meanwhile, President Bush yesterday appeared at the Capitol and in the White House to intensify his lobbying on another divisive health care issue: how to protect patients in managed-care plans. Meeting with the House Republican conference and, later, with physicians from a dozen medical specialties, he promoted the version of patients' right legislation that he hopes the House will adopt when it takes up the issue as early as next week.

The president faces a tough fight in persuading Congress to approve the legislation he favors, sponsored by Rep. Ernie Fletcher (R-Ky.), rather than a Democratic alternative, which passed the Senate this month and was adopted two years ago by the House. The Fletcher bill would guarantee much of the same care as the Senate's alternative but contains far tighter restrictions on litigation.

Bush told more than 200 members of the House GOP caucus in a 25-minute speech that the House GOP approach is one that "honors patients, not one that empowers the plaintiffs."

John Feehery, a spokesman for House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) said afterward that the president's appearance "was very, very helpful for our vote-counting operation" but said the leadership's effort to secure enough votes to pass the Fletcher bill "is a work in progress." The House plans to bring the issue to the floor within two weeks.

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